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AUTHOR Harris, David P.
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ABSTRACT

The writing patterns of adult native speakers of English was compared to that of students of English as a second language (ESL). Both groups wrote brief narrative accounts of a story they had seen on film. The writings revealed three basic organizational patterns, one pattern covering the six critical elements that made up the short story and two variants of that pattern. The six narrative points were clearly found in the writing of native speakers, but much less so in ESL students' writing. The primary differences were that some of the ESL students omitted opening scene-setting elements, and some native speakers used the rather advanced strategy of describing both the film character and the opening action in the same sentence. The experiment suggests that there may be more effective ways of analyzing organizational structures than are currently available, and that film-based narratives, which are both familiar and straightforward, are a good way of introducing organizational principles in the ESL classroom. Class prewriting activities could include discussion of the film's event structure and of ways to translate this into effective narrative discourse structure. Classes can analyze finished narratives together through profiles of the organizational patterns. (MSE)

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The Organizational Patterns of Adult ESL Student Narratives:

Report of a Pilot Study

David P. Harris

Several years ago in an investigation of the linguistic competence of university-bound ESL writers, I had students in several classes watch a very brief (1:43 Min.) silent cartoon film and then devote half an hour to writing a short account of what happened in the film, with a concluding comment on what they took to be the meaning of the cinematic story. The film was entitled "Mr. Koumal Invents a Robot," this being one of a series of whimsical Czech cartoons about a sad-eyed Everymanlike character named Koumal who is constantly being frustrated by the trials and complexities of today's world.[1] Despite the brevity and whirlwind action of these films, they proved quite effective in eliciting narratives from ESL students on the intermediate and advanced levels.

Last summer as I was preparing a presentation on ESL writing problems to be presented to a workshop of high school English teachers, I got to wondering whether the Koumal compositions might be used to demonstrate the writers' language use as well as their usage. That is, could one find things to say about the organizational techniques the students had used in recounting the adventures of Mr. Koumal? At first I was skeptical, for, after all, a narrative composition based on a 1½-minute narrative film seemed to leave little opportunity for much variation. Events in the film had been presented in straightforward chronological order, and the students had dutifully endeavored to keep the same sequence. Yet as I compared compositions, it at once became clear that there were very decided organizational differences, some of the papers seeming most suitably constructed according to English rhetorical principles, while others struck me as organizationally inept. I was intrigued by the challenge which this analytical problem presented.

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David Harris, Professor of Linguistics at Georgetown University, is the author of several ESL textbooks and of works on language testing. He was the president of TESOL in 1969-70.

[1]The Koumal films are distributed by SIM Productions Inc., Weston, Connecticut 06880 USA.

In recent years there has, to be sure, been a growing body of research dealing with the organization of prose and, in some cases, with its effects on student recall. Of special interest in terms of my problem were those models and analyses focussing on narrative, or story, discourse (e.g. Kintsch and Greene 1978, Mandler and Johnson 1977, Rumelhart 1977, and Thorndyke 1977). However, these studies appeared to have no direct application to the analysis of prose reconstructions of film events, while the most comprehensive investigation of film-based narratives reported to date, the Berkeley "pear film" studies (cf. Chafe 1980), concentrated on oral storytelling and, moreover, did not include any systematic procedures for analyzing and evaluating the organizational structure of the accounts. Thus I was left to my own devices.

My first step was to identify some compositions which seemed native-like in their organization and to determine what narrative points—that is, film events—those better organizers thought important to include in their compositions. I found that these were quite consistently five in number, to which was added the interpretative comment at the end. The six points were as follows:

1. As the film begins, we see Mr. Koumal doing his household chores, including polishing his shoes.
2. It occurs to Koumal that he could save himself some labor by inventing a simple shoe-polishing machine.
3. The machine proves highly effective, much to its inventor's delight.
4. Koumal then decides to devise a full-fledged robot to be his servant, and he is shown in the throes of planning and assembling his mechanical man.
5. However, when the robot is completed and is commanded to do Koumal's bidding, the inventor's dream turns to nightmare: the robot imperiously motions Koumal to polish its shoes, and at the fadeout we see our saddened hero following the commands of his servant-turned-master.
6. Interpretation of the story.

Comparing my selection of better organized papers with others that seemed less satisfactory, I found that the latter had very often omitted one or two of the six critical narrative points, making it difficult for the reader to fill in the gaps. But it soon became apparent that good organization depended on more than the inclusion and correct ordering of the six points, that is, the accuracy and adequacy of the coverage. There was also the matter of balance—the relative attention given to the several narrative points. In short, I found myself back with the traditional rhetorical triad: unity, coherence, and emphasis.

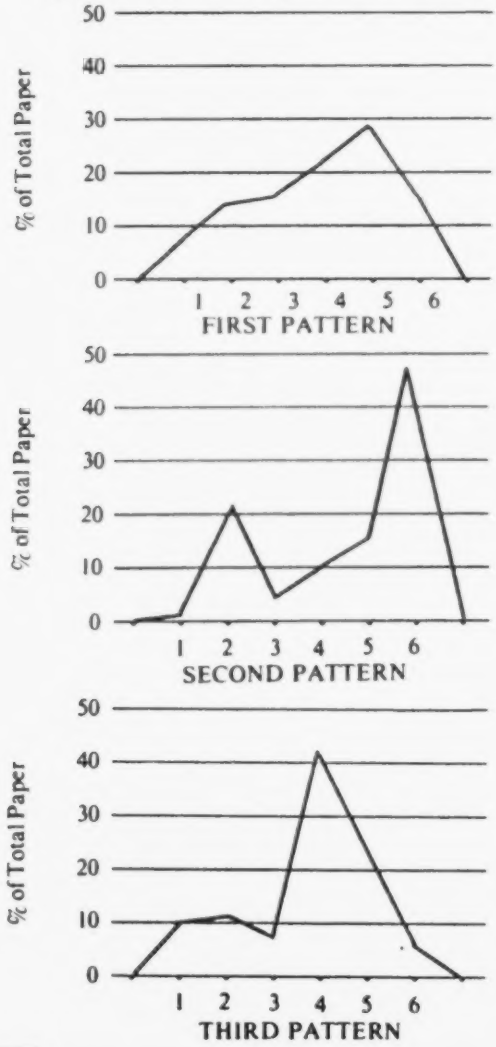
After experimenting with various procedures, I decided that the simplest way of determining emphasis would be adequate for my purposes: I counted the number of words devoted to each of the six points and converted these figures to the percent of the whole. To be sure, there were problems with this system, as, for instance, what to do about the omitted elements in the sentences of the less proficient writers (I decided to ignore them), but this quick and mechanical method seemed good enough for what was, after all, a pilot study.

Having established my procedure for analyzing the structure of the compositions, I applied the analysis to a sample of 35 papers (56 percent of my corpus), selected to represent a broad range of students' home countries and English proficiency levels (low-intermediate to advanced). Then, by constructing a simple bar

graph for each composition, drawing a bar to represent the percentage of the paper devoted to each of the six narrative points, I could represent the paper by an organizational curve—a kind of profile.

A comparison of the 35 profiles revealed that papers tended to follow three basic organizational patterns or to present variations thereof. These appear as the three patterns in Figure 1.[2]

Figure 1: Major ESL Organizational Patterns



[2]Each of the drawings is an exact composite of several actual composition profiles.

Pattern 1: The writer includes something on all six basic narrative points, the climax (greatest emphasis) being reached at point 5, Koumal's sad experience with his newly invented robot.

Pattern 2: The writer devotes most of his attention to the interpretation of the story (point 6), almost invariably omitting one or even two of the earlier narrative points in his haste to get to his discussion of the meaning of the film.

Pattern 3: The writer gives by far the most emphasis to the robot-inventing process—certainly an entertaining part of the film, but seemingly not so important thematically as the account of the effects of the invention.

Of the three patterns, the first impressed me as by far the most satisfying, and for the next steps of the study I assumed that compositions following Pattern 1 were exhibiting native-English-like organization.

It now seemed useful to get some idea of whether ability to follow Pattern 1 was strongly related to either the students' place of origin or their level of English proficiency. Of course, with a sample of only 35 papers, nothing conclusive could be determined, but one could hope at least to detect some tendencies.

I first gave each of the compositions a 1- to 3-point rating on the basis of how closely it conformed to Pattern 1—that is, included all six critical narrative points and reached a peak on point 5, Koumal's experience with his robot. (Distribution of ratings was: 1 (closest to Pattern 1) = 49%; 2 = 17%; 3 = 34%.) I then compared these compositional ratings with three criteria as follows:

1. Narrative ratings compared with writers' background countries. No strong connection was discovered. In slightly more than half the cases where comparisons could be made, compositions by students from a given country received organizational ratings from 1 to 3.
2. Narrative ratings compared with writers' general English proficiency levels. Here my criterion was the ESL class level to which the writers had been assigned on the basis of a standardized test battery. Again, no strong evidence of a connection was discovered. (For a rough idea of the correlation, I computed the phi coefficient: .19.)
3. Narrative ratings compared with general composition ratings. My criterion was the averaged holistic ratings (on a 4-point scale) which two experienced ESL teachers had given the compositions—ratings which certainly gave as much attention to grammar as to organization. Again, no strong evidence of a connection was discovered (phi coefficient: .20).

I am by no means ready to conclude that good organizational sense develops haphazardly. I suspect that the very inconclusive findings are largely attributable to the smallness of my sample and the crudity of the analytical procedure. All that can be said is that nothing in the comparisons stood out strongly.

So far in my study I had been proceeding on the basis of a pretty shaky assumption, namely, that Pattern 1 was, indeed, the one that native speakers of English—at least those who were competent writers—would regard as the most appropriate. I needed to verify this assumption.

For my first validation experiment, I used as my subjects tutors from our university's writing center. These tutors, who are mostly undergraduates, have been carefully selected and trained to work with other undergraduates who come to them voluntarily for help with their writing. Through the kindness of the director of the center, I was able to attend a meeting of 19 tutors and administer a simple experiment. I showed the group the Koumal film two times, asking them to take notes on points they would include in a narrative based on the film. I then handed out typed copies of 11 of the ESL student compositions, 4 of which followed Pattern 1, 3 each following Patterns 2 and 3, and the eleventh essentially following Pattern 1, but with variations. I asked the tutors simply to select the four or five compositions which they considered the best organized in terms of accuracy, adequacy, and balance.

Subsequent analysis of the ratings showed—somewhat to my surprise and most definitely to my relief—that, of the five compositions receiving the heaviest votes, four were the Pattern 1 compositions. The other composition which had most impressed the tutors was not the one following Pattern 1 with variations, but one organized according to Pattern 3. Inspection of this paper revealed that it was the longest of the 11 compositions (which I had been only moderately successful in matching by length).[3] The writer of this paper had, I could now see, dealt in enough detail with all six narrative points that a certain amount of imbalance, favoring point 4, was easily ignored.

This last finding naturally raised the question of whether there might be a general tendency to rate longer compositions more highly than short ones, with the better organizers on the whole writing longer compositions. My analysis, however, showed what many similar investigations have shown: that while there was some correspondence between length and quality, the correlation was only moderate. (Specifically, the rank-order correlation between tutors' ranking of the compositions and the number of words in the papers was .55.)

Incidentally, I found the tutors' discussion of their rating experience most interesting, particularly inasmuch as it appeared that they had had no training in working specifically with foreign students. There seemed to be general agreement that, even though I had emphasized in my instructions that papers should be rated on their organization and not on their grammar (I mentioned my findings that general English proficiency didn't appear to be highly related to organizational success on this task), it was difficult for the tutors not to be influenced by grammar and word choice.

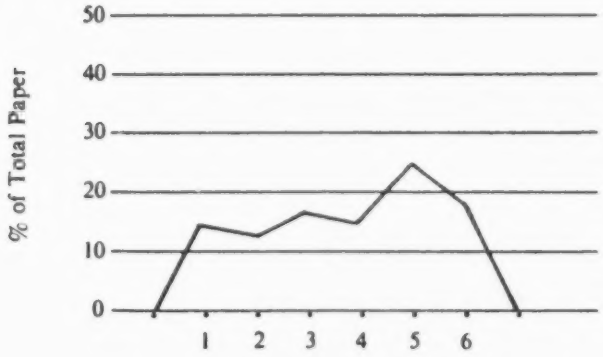
The other interesting point that the tutors made was that they noticed the degree to which the ESL writers empathized with Mr. Koumal and made reference to his emotional states. Most American students, they felt, would have reported the actions more neutrally. (We shall return to this point later in the report.) As an example of how far the ESL students' subjective interpretation could take them, one of the writers, observing Koumal rubbing his aching back during his household labors, reported that shoeshining gave Koumal "a pain in the kidneys."

At the same time that I was having the writing center tutors evaluate a sample of

[3]The 11 compositions ranged between 144 and 261 words, with a mean of 200.

ESL compositions, I undertook another validation experiment by asking the graduate students and faculty members attending my seminar on writing to perform the same writing task that I had assigned the ESL students: I had them view the Koumal film twice and then devote half an hour to summarizing the film in writing, adding an interpretation at the end. As would be expected, these adult native speakers and highly advanced L2 speakers of English found it hard to play the game straight. Some wrote bedtime stories for young children; others seemed to be intentionally deviating from conventional narrative style in as many ways as they could. This, of course, is what highly competent writers can and do do in their native language. Yet a composite profile of twelve of the native-speaker compositions showed that it essentially matched the ESL students' Pattern 1. The native speakers' profile appears in Figure 2. The only real difference was that the native speakers had proportionately more to say on most of the early narrative points than had the foreign students.

Figure 2: L1 Organizational Pattern



I also asked the seminar students and faculty members to select the four or five best organized compositions from among the same 11 I had given the writing tutors. Adding their choices to those of the tutors did not change the previous results so far as the top-ranked compositions were concerned.

From the foregoing experiments I felt some confidence in concluding that compositions organized along the lines of Pattern 1 did tend to strike native speakers as the most appropriately structured.

Related to organizational structure but not directly a part of the foregoing analysis is the matter of narrative openers—the devices the students used in beginning their compositions. Half the ESL writers used the simplest strategy of describing the action as the film opens: "Mr. Koumal is brushing his shoes"; "Mr. Koumal was so tired with the work to shine his shoes." No preference was found between present and past tense.

The second most favored beginning, used by about 30 percent of the subjects, was to introduce the film character by attaching a label to him: "Mr. Koumal is/was a —— (man)." Some of the labels referred to Koumal's most obvious physical

characteristic, his rotundity, others to his intellectual powers ("wise," "intelligent"), and some to his probable profession ("engineer," "mechanician," "a scientist of talent"). Many of these labels were clearly speculations based on the writer's interpretation of subsequent events; thus the opening served a kind of foreshadowing function.

The third opening strategy, employed by 20 percent of the ESL writers in the sample, was to plunge directly into the heart of the film story, the writers either not bothering to set the scene at all or including both Koumal's motivation and his plans, all in the same introductory statement: "Mr. Koumal wanted to make a robot because he thought that with it, he can solve all the things mechanically"; "One day, tired of doing works by himself, Mr. Koumal thought that he could find a machine to work for him." In two of the seven papers with openings like this, the writers then backtracked and described the film action from beginning to end. But the other five writers who entered the story in the middle simply proceeded from there. Generally their compositions fit Pattern 2 described earlier.

Another interesting feature of the openers was the number of writers (17 percent) who either referred overtly to the narrative as a story or began their compositions with a conventional story-marking phrase: "One day" or "Once upon a time." Only one student of the 35 opened with a reference to a film.

With only a dozen native-speaker narratives to draw upon, one can scarcely make any generalizations about how L1 openers compare with L2. Yet the findings are at least interesting and quite possibly suggest what we might find with a larger sample. As with the ESL students, half the native speakers used the strategy of simply describing what was happening as the film began. There was no strong preference for either present or past tense. Another 25 percent of the subjects used the second strategy of opening by attaching a label to the film character: "physically fit," "inventive and industrious," "a small, rotund man with a big smile." In no instance, however, did a native speaker attempt to identify the character's profession as did several of the ESL writers.[4] The remaining 25 percent of native-speaker narrators combined both of the above strategies in their opening sentence: "Mr. Koumal, a rather chubby, stubby fellow, opens the film attempting to polish his shoes"; "Mr. Koumal, a young, overweight man, finds that he has problems shining his shoes." None of the native speakers began in the middle of the film story, as did a number of the ESL students.

Though only one of the 12 native speakers referred to the narrative as a story, three used the terms *film* or *cartoon*. It will be remembered that only one in 35 ESL writers made the latter kind of reference.[5]

To summarize the observations about narrative openers, we can say that about 75 percent of the ESL writers began their compositions in ways quite similar to those

[4]I am reminded here of Deborah Tannen's study of oral narratives in Greek and English (Tannen 1980). Tannen's Greek women subjects, in reporting what happened in a narrative film, showed a greater tendency than their American counterparts to interpret rather than simply report elements shown in the film. Interpretation included reporting as fact what was conjecture.

[5]This finding, too, runs parallel to Tannen's (1980), who reported that her American subjects were more inclined than the Greeks to adopt a film-critic stance. But the small size of our native-speaker sample prevents us from treating the Koumal data as anything more than suggestive.

adopted by native speakers. The main differences between the two groups were (1) that some ESL students omitted the essential scene-setting elements, and (2) that some native speakers demonstrated the rather advanced strategy of describing both the film character and the opening action in the same sentence.

What, then, are the implications of this analysis of narrative organization? Given the small sample and the very specialized nature of the writing assignment, one can scarcely generalize about the way ESL students tell stories. The results do, however, encourage me to believe that we can, with practice and experimentation, develop more effective ways to analyze organizational structures than are presently available, even for so seemingly restrictive a genre as the narrative.

But just as interesting, to my way of thinking, are the possible pedagogical applications of the procedures we have been considering. Film-based narratives are, I have come to think, a good way to introduce ESL instruction on organizational principles. The film provides a uniform stimulus for the writers, yet, as the Koumal experiment demonstrates, still allows considerable scope for individual variation. The narrative is very likely a familiar form to most of our ESL students, who should take comfort both in its homely familiarity and its straightforward chronological ordering. Yet what one learns about organizing narratives in English can be applied to other kinds of writing more relevant to our mature, academically oriented students. Many technical reports, for example, follow essentially a narrative pattern. But more than this, as shown in the Koumal analysis, the general rhetorical principles of unity, coherence, and emphasis apply just as surely to the *simple* narrative as to the *higher* forms of writing.

Class prewriting activities can include discussion of the event structure of the film and then of ways to translate this into effective narrative discourse structure (Cf. Brewer and Lichtenstein 1981). Working cooperatively, the class can propose a set of basic narrative points to be included in their compositions and suggest the relative emphasis which each should receive. The teacher can then graphically depict these suggestions on the blackboard as composition profiles of the kind developed in the Koumal study. Subsequently, finished compositions judged by the students as particularly well organized can be analyzed by the class through such profiles. And procedures developed as the class works in this way on the narrative could, it would seem, continue to be utilized from time to time as the group moves on to more complex written forms.

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